

ACTING COACHES IN THE SANSKRIT THEATRE

With few exceptions, most of the recent studies on the *Nāṭyaśāstra* have stressed its *rasasūtra* and the aesthetic theory of Abhinavagupta to which it has given rise. It must be remembered, however, that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is primarily a practical code of acting destined for actors in the training for their performance (*prayoga*). With emphasis on voice production and bodily expression (*abhinaya*), song and music, the core of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* must have been essentially a textbook for the teaching of actors and dancers. It is to such a work that Kālidāsa refers at the moment that Gaṇadāsa states that he has taught Mālavikā the *pañcāṅgābhinaya*, by which he means *sattvābhinaya*, *vāgābhinaya* and *aṅgābhinaya*, plus song and music. The *saṃgīta* episode in the first two acts of the *Mālavikāgnimitra*, in fact, gives us valuable insight into the training of a performer on the Indian stage. Especially important is the view that Gaṇadāsa has of himself as her teacher. In Kālidāsa's text are several expressions which qualify him and at least one which qualifies his own teacher. Although in one instance he is addressed as *ārya* by Bakulāvalikā, he is more generally called *ācārya*, *naṭyācārya*, *abhinayācārya* or *nartayitr*. The latter term denotes specifically his function as a teacher of dancing, whereas the others signal him as an acting coach. Gaṇadāsa mentions his own training as follows, using *sutīrtha* to designate his teacher: *mayā sutīrthād abhinayavidyā śikṣitā* (I learned the art of acting from a good teacher)¹.

Kālidāsa employs four technical terms for acting, which delineate its practical aspect: *prayogaviṣaya*, *pañcāṅgābhinaya*, *abhinayavidyā* and *prayoga*. In the light of this, the earliest definition of drama as *abhinayārtha*, used by Bhāmaha in his *Kāvyaśālikā*, turns out to be quite accurate, and even more accurately it could be stated as *pañcāṅgābhī-*

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1. A. SCHARPÉ, *Kālidāsa-Lexicon*, vol. I, Bruges, 1956, p. 16.

nayārtha. It was the duty of the acting coach to impart to the *nāyaka*, *nāyikā* and other members of the theatrical troupe the tenets contained in a *pañcāṅgābhīnaya* text. How was this accomplished? Gaṇadāsa's mention of his teacher indicates that these principles of *abhinaya* were taught by master to pupil. For the method of teaching we must look to early references to teachers of actors. In the fourth century B. C. Pāṇini was aware of *naṭasūtras* (composed by Śilālin and Kṛśāśva), that is, texts in *sūtra* form that were devoted to the training of the actor (*naṭa*)². Later terms for actor, quoted by Patañjali in his Commentary on Pāṇini's Grammar, are *śobhanika* and *granthika*³. It would not be difficult to assume that the *pañcāṅga* text consisted of *sūtras* which were cited to the actor by his *ācārya* as the point of departure for knowledge of *prayogaviśaya*. The *naṭa* learned by rote the *sūtras*, by means of which he mastered his craft. By merely quoting the appropriate *sūtra*, the *ācārya* made his corrections for the improvement of the actor's performance. The *naṭasūtras* constituted an early text (*pūrvatantra*) by which the *nāṭyācārya* passed on to his disciples the *śiṣṭo-padeśa*, that is, the instruction learned from his teacher.

Whatever happened to this *pūrvatantra*? The question is answered by the following verse of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*:

śeṣam uttaratantraṇa Kohalas tu kariṣyati /
*prayogaḥ kārīkāś ca niruktāni tathaiva ca //*⁴

The author of the present *Nāṭyaśāstra* imprinted his mark upon his work, particularly in the first and last chapters, and also he credited those from whom he had taken or, we prefer to say, would take his materials. He, at a given moment, had not as yet added to the *pūrvatantra* the text of Kohala's *uttaratantra* (consisting of eleven *aṅgas*), and so he states that Kohala will make (*kariṣyati*) the remainder (*śeṣa*) of his text with an *uttaratantra*, with *uttara* referring to Kohala's continuation of the *pañcāṅgābhīnaya* text. It is from this point of view that the verse from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* can be easily understood.

In the *bhūmikāvikalpa* (distribution of rôles) chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* the third verse asserts that it is the *ācārya* who assigns the various rôles to the actors. The fourth verse repeats that the *ācārya* should distribute the rôles after having ascertained the *guṇas* of the actors⁵. It is only when we reach the twenty-first verse that the identification of the *ācārya* is made, and he is linked with playwright and

2. PĀṆINI, *Pāṇini's Grammatik*, ed. Otto Böhtlingk, Leipzig, 1887, p. 199. For a recent discussion of Pāṇini's knowledge of Sanskrit drama, cf. S. N. GHOSAL, *Pāṇini and the Sanskrit drama*, « Journal of the Asiatic Society », Calcutta, XVIII (1976), pp. 1-6.

3. PATAÑJALI, *The Vyākaraṇa-Mahābhāṣya of Patañjali*, ed. F. Kielhorn, 3rd ed., Poona, 1965, vol. II, p. 36.

4. BHARATAMUNI, *The Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharatamuni*, vol. IV, Baroda, 1964, p. 511.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 497.

player in this expression: *sūtradhāro nāṭyakaro nāyakaś*. After listing in previous verses qualifications of the ideal *sūtradhāra*, the thirtieth discloses his primary function:

*gītasya ca vādyasya ca pāṭyasya ca naikabhāvanavihitasya /
śiṣṭopadeśayogāt sūtrajñāḥ sūtradhāras tu //*⁶

The verse is of special significance for it also explains competently the term *sūtradhāra*, which has been misunderstood and mistranslated on so many occasions. He is rightfully called *sūtrajñāḥ* since he knows the *naṭasūtras* which constitute his own *śiṣṭopadeśa*, what he has learned from his *ācārya*. Consequently, the one who causes the actors to learn (*dhārayati*) the *naṭasūtras* is the (*naṭa*)*sūtradhāra*. Moreover, it is he who signals and demonstrates the *bhāvas* which are to be produced by the actors. In short, he is their acting coach.

By dint of his knowledge of acting (*abhinayavidyā*) he is able to control the whole performance and, at the same time, to take an active part in the production (from the *pūrvaraṅga* on) as one of the principal personages. In the *prastāvanā* of Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava*, the *naṭa* tells the *sūtradhāra*: *tā bhūmikās tadaiva bhāvena sarve gargyāḥ pātītāḥ* (All the members of the troupe have been made to learn their rôles by you)⁷. The statement immediately following indicates that both of them take part in the performance, the *sūtradhāra* playing the rôle of Kāmandakī and the *naṭa*, that of Avalokitā. Previous attempts to connect the *sūtradhāra* with puppet-shows and land-measurement and architecture must now be viewed as imaginative guesswork. The important verse of the Gaekwad Oriental Series edition of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* correctly characterizes the function of the *sūtradhāra* as an acting coach. Designations such as « chief architect of the theatre », « holder of the clue », etc. are inadequate for an understanding of the prime rôle of the *sūtradhāra* as *nāṭyācārya* on the Indian stage⁸.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 498.

7. BHAVABHŪTI, *Mālatīmādhava*, TSS 170, Trivandrum, 1953, p. 31.

8. I. SHEKHAR, *Sanskrit Drama: Its Origin and Decline*, Leiden, 1960, p. 82.